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ABSTRACT

In the many conferences, workshops, and panels for writing instructors the role of director of freshman English has been routinely ignored. The typical director does not even have a job description. But directors should interpret this lack of specifics to mean that they are not administrators set apart from faculty, but are engaged with faculty in a common enterprise. As an individual faculty member, a director should strive to implement change, should foster collegiality, and build on existing strengths. When making program changes, a director should enlist the combined efforts of as many faculty members as possible. The sharing of ideas and responsibility will in itself foster collegiality, a sense of unity of purpose among the many facets of the department. Finally, as directors of freshman English translate theory into practice in the composition classroom, they need to perceive the strengths and weaknesses of their departments, and to have a sense of the institution's perception of itself, its history its educational philosophy, and the role that freshman English is to play. (HTH)

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Directing Freshman English: The Roles of Administration in Freshman English Programs

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Directing Freshman English: The Roles of Administration

in Freshman English Programs

I open this discussion with a fearless prediction: beginning this afternoon and continuing at least through Saturday morning, we will be reminded more than once that we are attending only the second 4C's meeting of the 1980s and that our program theme is, predictably, achieving perspectives for the 1980s. This prediction has a corollary: by Saturday morning many of us will feel that we have perceived the future, but that it is--regrettably--only ourselves. Before you conclude that I deal only in safe and melancholy predictions, let me explain. We are essentially the same group of writing teachers who gathered in Washington last year to attend 204 panels and workshops and who gathered in Minneapolis two years ago to attend 140 meetings of the 4C's. This very session is one of 201 panels of the Dallas meeting. The total of workshops and panels for the past three years reaches 545, but in all these sessions discussion or debate on the role played by the man or woman who must somehow bring the collective imagination and thinking of the 4C's to the campus--the Director of Freshman English--has been routinely ignored. Only the Council of Writing Program Administrators special interest group comes close to dealing with the topic, and even this group seems curiously reluctant to discuss the roles played by composition directors in English departments. I will therefore, make my own fearless effort to define and discuss the roles directors of composition should

properly play. I do so for two reasons: first, because some public discussion of the subject is clearly overdue; and, second, because I believe that the profession's recent and astonishing growth in composition research will eventually count for very little if Directors of Freshman English cannot translate theory into practice.

A department chair at Miami University once compared his role to a street corner fire hydrant: the chair is to the department, he said, as the hydrant to the dog. Those of us who have directed writing programs must appreciate the analogy, but with this difference: the chair, like the hydrant, at least has a perceptible and clear function, while the Director of Freshman English on too many campuses has only a fuzzily perceived role. As revealed by the 1978 CEA National Survey of the Teaching of College Writing, the typical Director of Freshman English holds the doctorate and is in a tenure-track position. What the CEA does not reveal--but which can be fairly concluded--is that the typical director does not even have a job description. As the current director of a writing program founded by a past chair of the 4C's, I should be embarrassed to report that I have no job description other than a clear understanding that the job requires a reduced teaching load. Save for that important detail, no other description of what I must do in overseeing a staff of 100 on three campuses in 270 sections offered each year. But I am not embarrassed by this absence of specifics, because it seems to me that the very lack of clear definition is noteworthy. To me it underlines an important point all directors must know and believe deeply: that we are not administrators somehow set apart from our colleagues by an elaborate job description, but, rather, faculty members engaged in what we must see as a common enterprise. Directors must therefore, see themselves and the roles they necessarily play as, above all, faculty members with faculty roles to play. From this initial

assumption I will argue three broad themes as I define the role the Director of Freshman English should play in the decade ahead: working as an individual faculty member, the Director should seek to implement change; should foster, as much as possible, collegiality; and should build upon already existing strengths as they are perceived in and by the faculty and in the identity of the university.

First: the Director should seek to implement change. In emphasizing the role of change in course direction or content I do not mean to endorse the concept of change for the sake of change, nor even do I mean that change is necessarily, inevitably good. Rather it seems to me that the Director of Freshman English at a typical university finds himself or herself at the head of a sometimes moribund, often complacent writing faculty largely unaware of the theoretical and pedagogical ferment which so characterizes the 4C's. With the conspicuous exceptions of writing programs designed to accommodate a specialized student body--Carnegie-Mellon, for example--or dominated by a comprehensive composition philosophy--Van Nostrand's program at Brown comes to mind--the presentative writing program and its faculty does not attend the 4C's, does not agree on a set of coherent course objectives, and perhaps does not yet believe that the composition teacher's calling is at least as honorable as the literature teacher's. In fact one of our profession's long-running ironies is that even as we talk here in Dallas, there are teachers across the country assigning papers--due next Thursday at 10 a.m.--on such stimulating topics as "compare and contrast a small town with a big city" or "classify instruments of the orchestra or fraternity men and sorority women." Let me darken this portrait a bit more: as the number of composition sections has grown, the number of literature sections has declined, thereby largely contributing to the unhappy situation wherein literature specialists find themselves back in those Freshman

English sections they thought they had forever escaped. It should scarcely surprise us that resentment, hostility, or simply boredom may affect especially senior faculty, nor should it surprise us that the Director of Freshman English--even more so than the department chair--should be called upon to make the best of an unsettling academic environment.

If we can agree for the sake of discussion that the environment I describe is fairly typical, then it would seem to follow that the person most responsible for correcting it must be the director of the program. If he or she does not wish merely to preside over a program of regulated chaos, the director of composition will move, I suggest, in two ways. First the director will not underestimate the existing strengths of the faculty--its personnel as well as its even dimly perceived pedagogy--and surely will not identify himself or herself with a new program or proposal for change. If the course is to change in fundamental ways, the director will need the assent of as many faculty as possible, and such assent, I believe, cannot be realized if the director presents a program fashioned of cloth cut solely by himself. He or she should seek the best minds in the composition faculty, perhaps especially those who attend professional conferences, and should seek their collective wisdom when proposing changes of an essentially departmental--as opposed to personal or administrative--nature. My second point follows from the first: the director should be pedagogically agnostic. The director who identifies himself or herself with a new program risks failure as readily as the director who claims that a pedagogy is demonstrably, finally superior to all others. The truth, I think, is that composition pedagogy is as gray a thing as life itself, and the director who has a mind receptive to new ideas and new teaching methods will incorporate them into an existing program even if that incorporation means discarding old methods or repudiating long-held assumptions. I repeat, then, that the director

will seek to implement change, but will do so only with the combined efforts of as great a number of faculty as possible and only with the idea firmly in mind that today's program for change may be itself changed by this date next year.

My second theme is the encouragement of collegiality, and I hope it is clear by now why I feel that theme to be important. It has been said more than once that all of us are smarter than any one of us, and--chestnut though it is--the advice should be felt on the very pulses of our profession. As I said earlier, the director who seeks to implement change must do so with the assent of the group, and it seems clear that such assent will not be possible without some sense among the faculty of group identity, of collegiality at its best. At a time when the rigors of research and writing--or on a less sublime level, the grading of freshman papers--isolates us all too often from our colleagues, it may not be possible to encourage collegiality in even the friendliest departments. But in this area, too, the Director of Freshman English may help by showing a willingness to share authority and especially a willingness to engage several faculty in group work. Each of these points needs further comment. By sharing authority I mean presiding over the composition policy committee--but having no vote. By sharing authority I mean appointing an assistant director, if of course the program is large enough, whose term is fixed and rotated among members of the department. By sharing authority I mean even circulating position papers and syllabus proposals among several faculty members before accepting or rejecting the proposals. And all this is not mere Nixonian stroking; if a Director of Freshman English actually responds or follows through when his or her colleagues offer advice, the director will be perceived as a colleague whose authority stems from his or her active example of collegiality. And how might such collegiality be fostered still more by engaging several faculty in

group work? There are several possibilities, I think, and I am definitely not thinking of the old ad hoc committee ploy. Obviously a Director of Freshman English will not wish to create committees whose sole function seems to underline the director's role as bureaucrat; for such committees tend to separate director from colleagues--precisely what I argued earlier can be a real danger--and, clearly, such assignments may provoke only well-deserved scorn. While committees do have important functions, I am not thinking primarily of them when I say that the director should seek to engage faculty in group work. Among the possibilities open to the director are at least the following: the encouragement of team teaching, cross-grading, or team-grading--all of which may be realized in a few sections or, if successfully received, across the entire department. The rewards to ourselves of such enterprises are too obvious to need further comment.

My final theme is at once the most challenging and, perhaps, most difficult for a Director of Freshman English. I said at the beginning of this discussion that many of the ideas and programs presented at professional meetings may never reach the campus if the Director of Freshman English cannot translate those ideas from learned paper to daily syllabus. But if both spirit and flesh are willing enough to try to make that translation, it is terribly important that the director know the strengths of his or her own department and, as well, the perceived identity of the university itself. I think that one intuits or feels a sense of one's own institution, and I think that this intuition is often the result of a long and sensitive involvement in a department which belongs to a college which itself is incorporated by a university. That is, something incorporates even the university itself: a spirit, if you will; a mission; a sense of itself and place. In my department, in my university, there is a certain scarcely identifiable spirit which has something to do with the region,

the landscape, the architecture, and of course the school's sense of its own history. I mention all this in closing because I think that a Director of Freshman English in at least the decade ahead should know his or her own institution's sense of itself before presuming to lead the course into unexplored territory. The liberal arts context of the Miami course, for example, speaks volumes to me of my university's sense of education and of the role of Freshman English in that education. So, finally, what I say here today will not be applicable on all campuses for reasons which are both obvious and subtle. The subtle ones, in the long run, matter the most: Know your department's sense of itself, know your institution's perception of itself. If you really wish to be a Director of Freshman English, know at least that much. And Godspeed.